

# How to Read a Vitamin Label

**Vitamin A.** There's no need to get more than the Daily Value (5,000 IU) of vitamin A palmitate or acetate. Multis don't go above 10,000 IU to avoid increasing the risk of birth defects. While beta-carotene isn't toxic and doesn't cause birth defects, high doses (33,000 to 50,000 IU a day) may raise the risk of cancer in smokers. Our advice: Don't get more than 15,000 IU of beta-carotene from a pill. Instead, load up on beta-carotene-rich fruits and vegetables like cantaloupe, carrots, and sweet potatoes, which may help prevent cancer.

**Vitamin D.** It helps you absorb calcium. Yet, many older people get too little D from their food—or from sunshine, especially in the winter. The National Academy of Sciences recommends 200 IU a day for adults under 51, 400 IU for those aged 51 to 70, and 600 IU for anyone over 70. Look for a multi with at least 400 IU (the DV).

**Folic Acid.** Look for the Daily Value (400 mcg, or 0.4 mg), to reduce the risk of birth defects (for women who could become pregnant) and possibly heart disease, stroke, or colon cancer (for everyone).

**Biotin and Pantothenic Acid.** Ignore. You'd have to eat a bizarre diet to run short of either.

**Iron.** Many children and premenopausal women are deficient, but too much can cause overload (hemochromatosis) in susceptible people. To play it safe, men and postmenopausal women should look for zero to 10 mg of iron in their multis. The DV (18 mg) is okay for children and premenopausal women, but nobody should take more unless their doctor says so. Iron supplements can also cause constipation.

**Phosphorus.** Unnecessary. Look for no more than 100 mg; the less, the better. Too much may impair calcium absorption, and we already get more phosphorus than we need from our food.

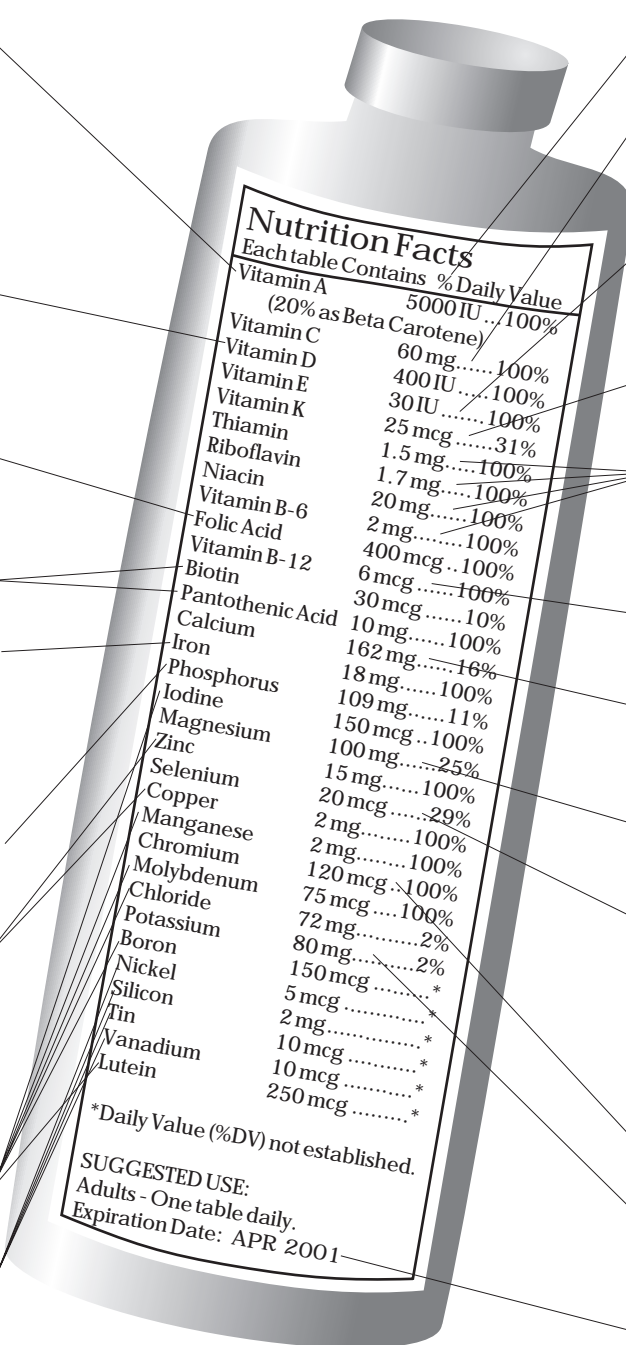
**Zinc and Copper.** Look for about 15 mg of zinc and 2 mg of copper—that's the DV of each—just for insurance. Too much zinc can impair the absorption of copper, so don't take a multi that only has zinc. More than 50 mg of zinc a day (on top of the 15 mg you get from food) may depress your immune system. Sucking on zinc gluconate lozenges may shorten a cold (possibly by killing cold viruses in the mouth), but taking high daily doses of zinc supplement won't.

**Iodine, Manganese, Molybdenum, Chloride, and Boron.** Ignore. There's no evidence that people need more than what they get from their food.

**Nickel, Silicon, Tin, and Vanadium.** Ignore. It's not clear that they're needed by humans at all.

**Lutein.** Ignore. Best bet: Eat your spinach.

Here's part of the label of the best-selling multivitamin, Centrum, which is often imitated by cheaper "store brands" with names like "Central-Vite" or "Sentury-Vite." Centrum is a great choice for premenopausal women, but probably has too much iron for men and postmenopausal women. We use the Centrum label to explain what to look for (or avoid) in your multi.



Nutrition Facts	
Each Table Contains	% Daily Value
Vitamin A (20% as Beta Carotene)	5000 IU...100%
Vitamin C	60 mg.....100%
Vitamin D	400 IU.....100%
Vitamin E	30 IU.....100%
Vitamin K	25 mcg.....31%
Thiamin	1.5 mg.....100%
Riboflavin	1.7 mg.....100%
Niacin	20 mg.....100%
Vitamin B-6	2 mg.....100%
Folic Acid	400 mcg...100%
Vitamin B-12	6 mcg.....100%
Biotin	30 mcg.....10%
Pantothenic Acid	10 mg.....100%
Calcium	162 mg.....16%
Iron	18 mg.....100%
Phosphorus	109 mg.....11%
Iodine	150 mcg...100%
Magnesium	100 mg.....25%
Zinc	15 mg.....100%
Selenium	20 mcg.....29%
Copper	2 mg.....100%
Manganese	2 mg.....100%
Chromium	120 mcg...100%
Molybdenum	75 mcg...100%
Chloride	72 mg.....2%
Potassium	80 mg.....2%
Boron	150 mcg.....*
Nickel	5 mcg.....*
Silicon	2 mg.....*
Tin	10 mcg.....*
Vanadium	10 mcg.....*
Lutein	250 mcg.....*

\*Daily Value (%DV) not established.

**SUGGESTED USE:**  
Adults - One table daily.  
Expiration Date: APR 2001

**% Daily Value.** It's often written as "%DV." It means the same as "%USRDA" (U.S. Recommended Daily Allowance). Labels use them interchangeably.

**Vitamin C.** While the DV is 60 mg, most people need 250 to 500 mg to saturate their bodies' tissues. If you follow the National Cancer Institute's advice to eat at least five to nine servings of fruits and vegetables a day, you should get that much. To try to get over a cold sooner, you'll need 1,000 mg to 3,000 mg a day—from a separate pill. Taking more than 1,000 mg at one time may cause diarrhea.

**Vitamin E.** Studies are under way to see if 100 IU to 400 IU a day reduces the risk of cancer and cataracts. In the best study so far, vitamin E didn't protect against heart attacks or strokes. Some studies suggest that vitamin E (about 50 IU a day) lowers the risk of prostate cancer, but only in smokers. It's tough to get more than the DV (30 IU) from food.

**Vitamin K.** Vitamin K may help strengthen bones. Women should get 65 mcg a day, while men need 80 mcg. If you eat lots of vegetables, especially leafy greens, you should get enough.

**Thiamin (B-1), Riboflavin (B-2), Niacin, and Vitamin B-6.** While there's no reason to get more than the DV for these B-vitamins, the high doses found in some multis are harmless. Fortunately, few multis come close to the super-high doses of niacin (about 500 mg a day) that may cause liver damage or the high doses of B-6 (more than 200 mg a day) that can cause (reversible) neurological problems.

**Vitamin B-12.** To play it safe, people older than 50 should take a multi with at least 25 mcg because they lack the stomach acid needed to extract B-12 from food. Others should get at least the DV (6 mcg). A B-12 deficiency can cause irreversible nerve damage.

**Calcium.** To reduce the risk of osteoporosis (and possibly colon cancer), shoot for these daily doses: 1,000 mg (if you're 19 through 50), 1,200 mg (51 through 70), and 1,500 mg (over 70). If you don't consume three or four servings of low-fat milk, yogurt, or cheese every day, take a 300-mg calcium supplement for each one you miss.

**Magnesium.** Americans may get too little from food (among the best sources: whole grains and beans), which may raise the risk of diabetes. Look for at least 100 mg, just for insurance (the DV is 400 mg).

**Selenium.** In a landmark trial, people from the (selenium-poor) U.S. Southeast were half as likely to get prostate, lung, and colon cancers if they were given 200 mcg a day of a yeast-based selenium supplement. Studies are under way to confirm the finding. Our advice: consider taking 200 mcg a day separately. (Natrol, Solgar, and YourLife use SelenoExcell—the kind used in the trial—in their selenium supplements. Natrol says that it will start adding 200 mcg of SelenoExcell to its line of My Favorite Multiples this summer. Other kinds of selenium may be as effective, but it's too early to say.) If you take 200 mcg separately, look for a multi with no more than the DV (70 mcg). Selenium is toxic, possibly in doses as low as 1,000 mcg.

**Chromium.** Look for the DV—120 mcg—to (possibly) reduce your risk of diabetes. There's no need to get more than 200 mcg a day.

**Potassium.** Ignore. Amounts in multis are trivial (the DV is 3,500 mg). Instead, eat plenty of fruits and vegetables, which are good sources. That's a better way to help keep your blood pressure from rising with age.

**Expiration Date.** Make sure that it's at least a few months away.